DAWN

OPINION

Urban denial

FOR decades, policymakers have sustained the narrative that Pakistan is a predominantly rural country, with only 39pc of its population classified as urban. However, a new World Bank study upends this long-held belief. The study reveals a strikingly different reality: nearly 88pc of the population actually lives in areas with urban characteristics. Of this, 46pc people reside in high-density cities, while 42pc live in moderately dense urban centres. This finding indicates that secondary cities and peri-urban areas, rather than the megacities, have been the real engines of urban expansion. Yet they remain systematically overlooked in official classifications and policy frameworks. The discrepancy is far more than a statistical quirk; it exposes a deep-rooted planning and governance failure, marked by distorted policymaking, misallocated resources, and a fundamental misunderstanding of where and how most Pakistanis actually live. Since 1972, the task of defining what constitutes an 'urban' area in Pakistan has been left to provincial and municipal committees that operate without clear criteria. Factors such as population size, infrastructure development and access to public services are largely ignored. These committees are also under no formal obligation to take population density or settlement patterns into account when classifying an area as urban, nor are they required to periodically update or revise urban boundaries. This has rendered vast peri-urban settlements statistically invisible. Provincial variations underscore the absurdity. Officially, Islamabad's urban population stands at just 47pc against the actual 90pc. In KP, the actual urban share is nearly thrice the officially reported 15pc. Such discrepancies expose a systemic flaw in how Pakistan classifies its urban and rural populations.

The misclassification of urban areas as non-urban has serious consequences. On the one hand, the government loses significant property tax revenue; on the other, residents of these areas are excluded from urban development planning and deprived of essential public services. The misclassification is deliberate. Underreporting urbanisation helps sustain the illusion of a predominantly rural Pakistan, keeping millions outside the urban tax net. The result is a governance vacuum: millions live in urban conditions without receiving urban-level services or policy attention.

The World Bank's findings should be a wake-up call for policymakers to update the country's outdated urban definitions and integrate functional, data-driven methods into planning. Recognising peri-urban areas as legitimate urban spaces would not only promote fiscal fairness but also unlock economic potential. Managed well, urbanisation is a powerful engine of growth; neglected, it becomes a trap of congestion, deprivation, and fragmentation. Pakistan is not a rural country inching towards modernity; it is an urban nation in denial. And the cost of that denial will be measured in wasted resources, missed opportunities and human suffering.

Mayor Mamdani

WHAT Zohran Mamdani has achieved with his win in the New York City mayoral race is, to put it in US lawmaker Bernie Sanders' words, "one of the great political upsets in modern American history". Mr Mamdani, who will become the Big Apple's first mayor of Muslim and South Asian descent, has indeed created history, through a relentless campaign to convince the citizens of one of the world's greatest and most diverse cities to give him a chance in the driving seat. His victory also gives progressive forces the world over some hope at a time when the far right is ascendant globally. Mr Mamdani is truly a citizen of the world; his parents have roots in the subcontinent, he was born in Uganda and later became a naturalised American citizen, while his wife is Syrian. Domestically, his appeal to NYC's working men and women, its immigrant communities and young voters helped pull off a stunning victory. The self-professed social democrat's campaign promised to confront the cost of living crisis by raising taxes on the superrich. On the foreign front, he is a staunch supporter of Palestine.

After the euphoria fades and Mr Mamdani moves into City Hall, he will have his work cut out for him. After all, his progressive stances — and proud embrace of his religious and ethnic identity — have earned him strong detractors. Perhaps the most prominent is the US president, who has derisively referred to the mayor-elect as a 'communist', and had earlier threatened to cut federal funding of NYC if Mr Mamdani won. Moreover, the Democratic Party establishment was slow in its endorsement, while NYC's new mayor faced vile abuse targeting his religion, ethnic background, and even his eating habits, on the campaign trail. He was also accused of antisemitism for resisting the powerful Zionist lobby. All these negative forces will continue to create obstacles in Zohran Mamdani's way. Yet his victory — as well as Sadiq Khan's success as London mayor — is a resounding denunciation of the far right's demonisation of Muslims and immigrants. These political journeys show that many young voters in the West are looking to back candidates that support social and economic justice platforms, and are least concerned about candidates' ethnic or confessional backgrounds. Racists and Islamophobes may be on the march, but Mr Mamdani's victory rekindles some hope.

Peace power

FOR India and Pakistan, it is guns, and not dialogue, that must fall silent. In a positive move, the first people-to-people contact since the May clashes between the two neighbours has recently taken place. On Tuesday, over 2,000 Indian Sikh pilgrims set foot on Pakistani soil via the Wagah border to participate in Baba Guru Nanak Dev's 556th birth anniversary celebrations. In the past six months, India had restricted Hindu and Sikh devotees' travel to Pakistan. The latter country, however, has issued 2,150 visas for the 10-day festivities, displaying a mature approach. The remnants of Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu history are embedded across Pakistan. There is little choice but to agree that civilised nations, despite their bones of contention, function on the principles of mutual respect and regard for a common heritage.

The BJP-led dispensation's politics of majoritarianism is finally losing its sheen due to governmental failures in India. Sadly, ordinary citizens on either side, particularly divided families, have been held hostage to hard-line aspirations, and the resultant friction, for far too long. This has damaged India's image under the shadow of Hindutva, and hindered progress. Given the present tensions, goodwill through trade, entertainment, sport and cultural diplomacy may be hard to achieve. But course correction can begin by promoting religious tourism, especially as sites held sacred by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus are found on both sides of the border. Public diplomacy lowers temperatures and breaks down barriers that prevent collective prosperity. So far, India is adamant about playing politics over visas for Pakistanis. But Pakistan should continue its support for people-to-people contact, keeping it separate from the age-old problems that plague the two countries. Reviving the travel economy with an overhauled regulatory and official framework will promote pluralism, regional harmony, and socioeconomic growth, and build a rich cultural milieu. Above all, it will defuse war lobbies in both countries.

BY ALI TAUQEER SHEIKH

Transboundary rivers

Upstream states are increasingly weaponising water resources.

DURING a recent closed-door policy meeting, I was asked a question that cut to the heart of the region's hydro-future: is the era of negotiated water-sharing in South Asia truly coming to an end? Or has the age of unilateral control already taken hold, leaving cooperation and regional stability a nostalgic memory?

The answer, sadly, is playing out in the valleys and deserts of our immediate neighbourhood. Pakistan now finds itself caught in a dual chokehold. In April 2025, India suspended the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, the only long-standing negotiated framework between upper and lower riparians in South Asia. Soon thereafter, plans to divert the Chenab through new inter-basin canals were announced. Simultaneously, Afghanistan, unbound by any treaty with Pakistan, declared it would dam the Kunar River before it returns to our territory.

Upstream states are increasingly weaponising water resources. The scholarship is clear, yet, often ignored. As Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner's influential 2006 framework on hydro-hegemony contended, "Power is the most fundamental aspect in controlling water in a transboundary river basin." This provides a clear articulation of how upstream states exercise power over shared waters, consistent with arguments about upstream arbitrariness and dominance in water governance.

Since the 1950s, the unilateral construction of massive dams and diversion projects has remained a preferred strategy to secure water for agriculture and hydropower. But at what cost? Chronic scarcity, ecological collapse, and geopolitical crises have become the unfortunate downstream legacy.

Let's look at the fate of four other neighbouring basins, arbitrarily bifurcated at the time when the internationally negotiated Indus Waters Treaty was coming to life.

Nile Basin: The foundational example of this trend is the construction of the Aswan Dam, completed in 1970. This massive structure provided Egypt with ultimate control over the Nile's flow, securing its water share unilaterally based on a 1959 agreement with Sudan that deliberately excluded upstream states like Ethiopia. This was a foundational act of hydro-hegemony.

This historical power structure has come full circle. Ethiopia's unilateral decision to fill and operate the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam represents a direct attempt to overturn Egypt's historical control. The past has finally caught up with the hegemon. The result? A future of more frequent droughts threatens to reduce the Nile's flow, adding an existential urgency, and potential for conflict.

Jordan River: This weaponisation of upstream control, first perfected on the Nile, found a more immediate and violent echo along the Jordan River. Israel's National Water Carrier, completed in 1964, was a major diversion project. When the Arab League planned its counter-diversion, it led to cross-border military skirmishes that eventually culminated in the Six-Day Arab-Israel War in 1967. The basin's crisis is exacerbated by being one of the most severely impacted regions globally by rising temperatures and reduced precipitation.

Tigris and Euphrates: After decades of planning, Turkiye initiated the massive Southeastern Anatolia Project, known as GAP, in the 1980s, establishing permanent upstream-downstream power asymmetry with Syria and Iraq. This is compounded by Iran's more than a dozen dams and diversion tunnels on Tigris tributaries.

This structural asymmetry results in the slow death of Mesopotamia as multi-year droughts accelerate the collapse of agriculture and intensify the desertification of the once-fertile floodplains. The consequence is not just local: this creates massive 'Sand and Dust Storms' which sometimes reach as far as Balochistan, proving that water conflicts have profound, border-transcending ecological consequences.

Kura-Aras Basin: In the South Caucasus, the Aras River forms the borders between Turkiye, Armenia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Here, water diversion by Armenia does more than just reduce quantity; it carries severe pollution, disproportionately affecting downstream Iran and Azerbaijan who suffer from both scarcity and environmental degradation. The pattern of unilateral control is being tragically repeated across South and Central Asia.

Ganges River: The Farakka Barrage on the Ganges diverts water towards the Hooghly River, significantly reducing the dry-season flow into Bangladesh. Despite the Ganges Water Treaty (1996), the unilateral diversions continue, particularly concerning the critical Teesta River. Bangladesh is affected by the Himalayan glacial recession, and increasingly volatile monsoon patterns exacerbate water scarcity.

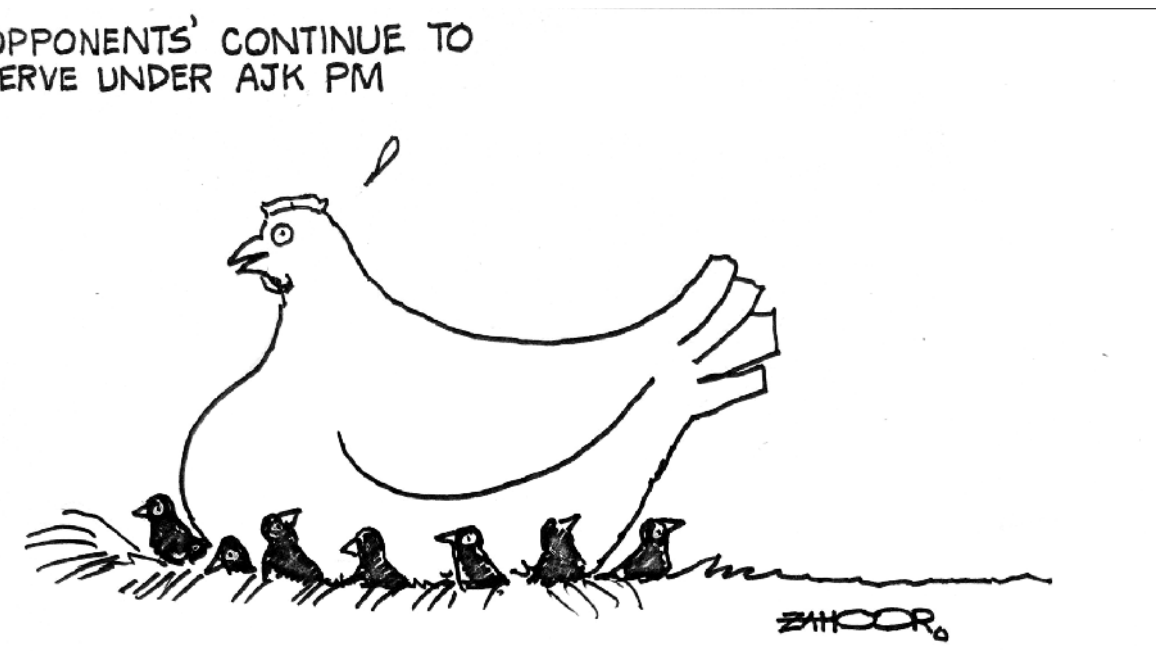
The Amu Darya and Kabul River systems: This acute Central Asian hydropolitical stress is a microcosm of a larger regional dynamic, particularly concerning governance by Afghanistan. The massive Qosh Tepa Canal project on the Amu Darya is designed to divert 17-20 per cent of the river's flow to irrigate Afghanistan's northern provinces. This canal poses a direct threat to the established water quotas of downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which rely heavily on the Amu Darya. The absence of a basin-wide agreement ensures that this diversion will deepen existing water conflicts, pushing regional players to the breaking point.

Furthermore, the construction and operation of the Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmand River significantly reduces essential water flows into Iran, directly violating the 1973 Helmand River Water Treaty. Unilateral resource development illustrates a wider trend where new infrastructure projects directly translate to reduced water security for neighbours.

Afghanistan's major river systems (like the Kabul River and its tributary the Kunar) are crucially dependent on snow and glacier melt from the Hindukush. This vital upstream position makes development politically charged, as seen in the recent tensions over the reported plan for a dam or diversion project on the Kunar River that flows into Pakistan's Indus system — a direct parallel to the pressures India is exerting on the Chenab.

The era of negotiated water-sharing is ending, replaced by the unilateral control of upstream states from the Nile to the Indus. They prioritise rapid development over shared resource integrity, accelerating instability and water stress, which is magnified by climate change into an existential threat. The suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty proves that such agreements are tragically vulnerable to hydro-hegemony. Failure to cooperate leads not just to conflict, but to structural disaster. The global community must recognise unilateral river diversion not as an act of sovereignty, but an act of water aggression. ■

The writer is a climate change and sustainable development expert.



BY KHURRAM HUSAIN

NFC and the 27th amendment

THE provincial governments are under pressure to free up resources from their share of transfers under the NFC award to help meet defence and debt servicing requirements of the federal government. Conversations with those in the provincial governments who are familiar with these developments suggest they are preparing to accommodate this pressure, but in a way that does not require amending the constitutional clause which guarantees that the provincial share in the NFC award will not be reduced.

It is hard to make a case for sharing the costs of debt servicing with the provinces. Unless the centre is willing to agree that it will only take on additional debt with the approval of the provincial governments, it cannot ask them to share in the cost of servicing this debt. But defence expenditure is different. The provinces can be told that since they are beneficiaries of the protection provided by the armed forces, some portion of the cost of maintaining this protection must be borne by them. The room to debate this matter is now limited since the centre has indicated that it must get assent on this question, otherwise it will modify the Constitution to extract the resources it needs regardless.

The total amount being asked of the provinces is supposedly around Rs500 billion per annum. The provinces have to agree on two things. First, they have to agree on who will bear how much of the burden to free up this amount between them. Second they have to agree on a mechanism on how the freed-up funds will be transferred. The next NFC meeting is scheduled tentatively for Nov 27. If the provinces come to this meeting with their assent to free up Rs500bn from their share of NFC transfers for defence-related expenditures of the federal government, and a viable mechanism through which to do this, the need to amend Article 160(3A) will not be necessary and that part of the 27th amendment which seeks to amend this clause may get dropped.

What is most important for the provincial governments at this time is to provide their assent to the demand from the centre. Once that happens the rest is negotiation, and they can take more time to agree on the burden sharing between them and the mechanism.

Here are a few things that could make their job a little simpler. A formula already exists to allocate the provincial share of the federal divisible pool among the provinces. Perhaps the same formula can be used to determine the burden each province must share to free up Rs500bn worth of resources from their NFC transfers. This would mean about half of the total would have to come from Punjab, a quarter from Sindh, 16 per cent from KP and around 10pc from Balochistan.

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Second, some mechanisms already exist through which provincial government resources are paid out directly to the army. For example, every time a provincial government calls the army in aid of civil power they have to pay for the costs of the deployment from their own resources. What would be required now would be a series of modifications to make such a mechanism automatic, and some kind of legal cover so that a portion of the defence budget can be made part of the obligations that a provincial government has to meet. Once this is done, then a separate stream can be opened under NFC transfers, whereby the provincial government's share of the defence budget would automatically be credited to the army's account.

None of this requires a constitutional amendment. The NFC is enough of a forum to build the consensus and any necessary legislation can then be passed by the relevant assemblies relatively easily. The share of the provinces under NFC transfers will not be impacted. What will change will be the amount landing up in provincial government coffers under these transfers.

The impact of this will hit Punjab the hardest. The other provinces can still bear their share of the burden being demanded without having to modify their entire budget strategy. But Punjab is ruled by a chief minister who apparently wants to spend her way to the prime ministership and the enormous funds being spent on schemes to buy her popularity will take a huge hit. It could be an unrealistic expectation on her part already to think that she can buy the Punjab voter this easily. The strategy of buying the Punjab voters' loyalty was followed by Nawaz Sharif in the years of his ascendancy. But there are reasons to believe it may not work this time round. Can Maryam Nawaz afford a Rs250bn hit to her budget while holding on to this ambition? She may well have no choice.

What the provinces are going to be wary of is ensuring that the amount stays at Rs500bn in the years to come. Having given their assent to shoulder some of the responsibility for meeting the costs of national defence, they will naturally worry that the amount could rise next year, and then again the year after and so on. How can they agree to this demand in a way that would also cap their share at the outset?

There is no easy answer here. Perhaps they can have the amount written down in the NFC award, so modifying it would require another award altogether. And the threat of a constitutional amendment is a heavy one and cannot be wielded easily and often. Once the amount is inscribed in the NFC, next to the same language that enshrines provincial shares in the federal divisible pool, or the proceeds of royalties from crude oil or natural gas development surcharge, it would provide a somewhat secure ceiling that would still require some effort at consensus building to modify.

The other clauses of the so-called 27th amendment are a different story. But for the NFC award, it is possible that an amendment may not be required provided the provinces agree to shoulder a part of the burden of defence spending. ■

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